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SUBJECT: PANAMA BRACES FOR NORIEGA'S RETURN

SUMMARY

[¶](#)1. (SBU) On Thursday, March 16 Panamanian newspapers reported in banner headlines that the U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons plans to release former Panamanian dictator Manuel Antonio Noriega on September 9, 2007, after 17 years in a Tampa, Florida prison, and that Noriega would return to Panama. Noriega has been convicted in Panama for several murders and other crimes that carry 20-year sentences. The GOP claims that two of its extradition requests are pending before the USG since the 1990's. The Supreme Court and the Public Ministry are already jockeying for control of the case. End summary.

GOP reactions

[¶](#)2. (U) The GOP reacted immediately. Following the March 16 headlines, President Torrijos firmly stated that Noriega's return is not a political issue, but a judicial one that should be handled by the Supreme Court according to the Constitution just like with any other Panamanian citizen. Vice President/Foreign Minister Samuel Lewis backed by Panamanian Ambassador in the U.S. Federico Humbert, publicly stated that Noriega's release is a "judicial" issue and that the GOP would only transmit to the USG any request for extradition coming from the authorities.

[¶](#)3. (U) Separately, Attorney General Ana Matilde Gomez announced that the Public Ministry is ready to request Noriega's extradition as well. Gomez has asked Public Ministry officers to submit updated reports on Noriega's convictions in Panama, to include any pending cases against him. (Note: Noriega has two 20-year convictions for the murders of military officers who opposed him; a 15-year conviction for the murder of physician Hugo Spadafora; an 8-year conviction for embezzlement; a 5-year conviction for alien smuggling; and finally an 18-month conviction for illicit enrichment. Convictions in Panama always are served concurrently. End note.)

[¶](#)4. (SBU) MFA Director for Legal Affairs Iana Quadri, backing Lewis and Humbert, told Emboff that Panamanian law requires extradition requests of convicted felons to come from the Supreme Court. Quadri added that in some cases, the Public Ministry is also authorized to make extradition requests. In either case, Panama's MFA would be the

authority channeling the request to the USG. Quadri claimed that MFA has two extradition requests for Noriega pending.

Comment

¶5. (SBU) The GOP clearly was eager to pass the ball to the judiciary to avoid any taint from Noriega. But is the GOP also hedging its bets? In 2005 President Torrijos appointed Noriega's daughter, Sandra, to a consular post in the Dominican Republic. Just last week, the Ministry of Foreign Relations appointed Noriega's youngest daughter, Thais, as an entry-level diplomat. (In fact, Thais Noriega entered Panama's Foreign Service with nine others. All ten got failing grades on the entrance exam, although Thais got the highest marks of the ten. Foreign Minister Lewis decided to admit all ten.) Panamanians have mixed feelings on whether Noriega should return to Panama or not. There is no doubt that Panamanians want Noriega to pay for his crimes, yet many feel that his return to Panama could be dangerous. Noriega still has friends here. He undoubtedly has large amounts of money stashed away. He knows lots of incriminating details about many people in and out of government. He could end up escaping from prison. Lack of security in prisons as well as corrupted officials have allowed criminals to escape in the past. Panamanians have no guarantee that Noriega would not do the same.

Eaton